

Star Wars

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N 1

Fair Prey

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"Six meters of muscle, teeth, and venom."

Tyro Viveca, the galaxy's wealthiest Krish, raised his glass and took a long sip of dun brandy.

"Hyperfast reflexes and a vicious streak as wide as the Cron Drift. I'd say you're looking at the most efficient predator in history."

He loosed a razor-edged smile at his visitor.

"My taxidermist just stuffed it this morning."

The alien's guest politely stepped forward and leaned in to examine the specimen: a gray-green tube of flesh, looking like the repulsive offspring of a serpent and an eel, coiled on a polished wooden base. Its head, frozen in mid-strike, was a mass of glistening white spikes.

"Impressive," the man said, raising his eyebrows quizzically as he turned back toward his beaming host.

"Aren't Florn lamproids sentient?"

"Unquestionably. Though they lack the culture and art you and I take for granted, they have the brains to solve fiendishly complex puzzles. That's what makes them such a smashing hunt."

Viveca strolled to the side table and removed the crystal stopper from a heavy cut-glass decanter.

"More brandy?"

The visitor shook him off with a wave of his hand and settled back into an armchair with a squeak of leather and a sigh of cushioning. His bright eyes scanned his surroundings for the dozenth time. The room was an enclosed octagon with pillars at the corners, dark walls trimmed with gold. A pair of holographic lamps provided dim illumination, but he could clearly make out the severed heads of a hundred sundry creatures, each mounted on a varnished plaque bearing the unlucky beast's species, weight, planet of origin, and date of death. Seven niches held full-sized predators arrayed in fearsome poses; the eighth held Viveca's rarest firearms and his collection of antique water pipes.

The entire room stank of tabac and desiccated hides.

"That's the male, you know."

Viveca held his half-filled glass on the balls of his scaled fingers, swirling the liquid lazily. His guest looked up questioningly.

"The lamproid," Viveca explained. "I killed and mounted the male. I sedated and captured his mate, and have her locked on the grounds for a later hunt. Perhaps you'd care to join me."

"Perhaps," the visitor answered, resting both booted feet on a bantha-Ieg ottoman. "But I believe we have business to take care of first."

"Indeed," remarked the paunchy Krish. "I seldom receive uninvited callers, because most

beings realize my time is of immense value. You claim to have something to show me.

It had better be worth it."

"Don't worry," assured conman Cecil Noone, sliding a ribbed metalbox out from beside his chair and flashing the most charming grin in his arsenal.

"You won't be disappointed."

The skies of Kabal opened up for the third time that morning. Kels Turkhorn snarled and resisted the urge to sprint for the awning of the nearest merchant tent. The locals took the sudden cloudbursts in stride and Kels didn't want to give off an outsider's vibe. Fat raindrops splashed on her nose, matted her whitish hair, and trickled down the back of her neck.

The busy marketplace carried the hot scent of sweat and the salty tang of the coastal breeze. Mindful of the unfamiliar bodies in close proximity, Kels clutched her supply bag with both hands. Even a professional pickpocket could sometimes get taken to the cleaners.

The drenched bazaar was one of the few public attractions in Palisade, a small coastal community on Kabal's largest equatorial island. Less than a year ago the planet had been disciplined by a wing of Imperial TIE bombers for declaring its neutrality in the Galactic Civil War. But the damage had been confined to Kabal's capital city, half a hemisphere away. The residents of Palisade continued to lead quiet, industrious lives centered on fishing and a modest tourist trade.

A burst of loud, mocking laughter caught Kels' attention.

Farther down the boulevard sat another trader's stall, this one with a dirty gray awning instead of the striped pink and white ones that draped the bazaar in incongruous gaiety.

Starship parts, dead appliances, plastic sandals, and other miscellaneous junk lay piled on the stall's front display table. The proprietor, a female Squib with grease-stained fur and one clipped ear, was leaning out of the booth and shaking her fist menacingly.

"This new wire, you say?" screeched the Squib. "Not likely, I say! This junk!"

She tossed a small coil of golden wire back to her customer and crossed her arms in smug satisfaction.

"You barter with that? You crazy!"

Kels saw the target of the Squib's abuse and closed her eyes in resigned pain.

"Dawson," she muttered, and moved quickly through the crowd to her compatriot's rescue.

Dawson stood barely a head taller than the diminutive Squib. A Tynnan, his aquatic mammalian ancestry was evident in his webbed paws and sleek brown pelt. Dawson tried to say something but was cut off with a fresh gush of invective.

"That junk!" the Squib chattered. "You junk! You ugly face! You teeth look like two big deckplates!"

Two tall, red-maned aliens who were lingering nearby to watch the exchange roared with laughter and looked at the Tynnan to see if the taunts would spark a reaction.

Kels came alongside Dawson and placed one hand on his shoulder.

He peered up at her through the lenses of his ocular enhancer.

"Kels!" he cried in welcome.

"Just handling a delicate bit of negotiating."

"Right," she said dubiously, eyeing the twenty-centimeter white plastic sphere balanced in Dawson's right palm. "What kind of equipment is that?"

"You ever hear of a Quay?" he asked.

"It's a novelty item. A 'preprogrammed prognosticator.' You ask it a question, and it spits out one of several stored answers."

Dawson was animated, visibly excited about his discovery.

Raindrops tumbled from his quivering whiskers.

"I've counted three already."

"It's a toy?" Kels snickered, disgusted. "You're haggling for that little thing?"

"Little, yeah!" cackled the Squib. "Size of you brain!"

The two tall aliens laughed again, shaking their shaggy manes and dousing the vicinity with spray.

Kels turned to the Squib, annoyed.

"You always treat your customers this way?" she snapped.

"Customer? Hah! News to me. You no buyin', you no customer."

The Squib grinned up at her onlookers who responded with appreciative guffaws.

"Let me see that," Kels told Dawson.

She took the sphere from the Tynnan's paws and shook it.

"THE SPIRITS SAY YES," boomed the Quay.

Kels took two steps backward as if frightened, bringing her to the far end of the display table.

"It's stupid," whined Kels petulantly, gripping the Quay in both hands and thrusting it away from her body as if it were a poison-ous snake.

"I don't want it." She suddenly threw the Quay up in the air, a steep, high arc. The others' eyes looked skyward to follow its path. As Kels brought her arms down, she closed each hand around a power coupling and lifted them from a stack on the table. By the time the toy landed in the Squib's paws, the couplings were tucked away in Kels' waistband sash.

"You done it now!" yelled the Squib, as Kels spun on her heel and walked away.

"Broke for sure! You clumsy!" The Squib glared at Dawson, baring her teeth threateningly, then looked down at the Quay.

"You broke?" she asked, shaking the toy.

"MY REPLY IS NO."

The Squib, pleased with her joke, looked up at the tall aliens who threw back their heads and howled as if they'd just witnessed the funniest thing in the galaxy. Dawson excused himself and trotted after Kels.

"Wait up!" he shouted, struggling to catch her on his squat legs. She looked back and slowed her pace. Dawson came alongside, splashing through a puddle and ejecting a spray of mud flecks. Kels looked away from the misty coastline toward a distant green swelling of land at the island's interior.

"Wonder if Noone's having any luck?"

Recently, Noone, Kels, Dawson, and the Sluissi cyborg Sonax had finally scored in their career as thieves, nabbing a priceless Hapan Gun of Command. In the process, they'd double-crossed their former Hutt employer, killed a Bimm crimelord, and added insult to injury by stealing the late Bimm's private luxury yacht. Noone, their leader, had urged his employees to be patient. Once the sale of the gun netted them a fortune, they'd never again have to worry about crime bosses with burning vendettas. But weeks later they were still waiting, and patience was in short supply.

The meeting with the Rebel Alliance had been a joke. Despite the Rebels' rumored victory at an Outer Rim bolthole called Yavin, the self-righteous flagwavers didn't have two scrip coins to rub together. The fresh-faced Alliance agent had offered less than a tenth of Noone's asking price.

The Empire was even worse. Sonax despised the Imperials from personal experience, so the others had had to assure her they were merely arranging a rendezvous with a local criminal syndicate. Meanwhile, Noone slipped out to negotiate with the Imperial consul-general of Kothlis. But Consul-General Halsek had tried a double-cross of his own, and they'd blasted out of port just ahead of 24 stormtroopers and a legion of planetary militia.

Which is why they'd ended up here, in Palisade. The modest island was dominated by the sprawling estate of Tyro Viveca, a hulking Krish business baron with a legendary reputation for eccentricities. More importantly, he had a passion for sport hunting, and in the past had dropped obscene sums for rare, antique, or cutting-edge weaponry. Now that they'd arrived, Kels wondered why they hadn't tried this avenue before. If you really want to jack up the price on something, she thought with a cruel grin, market it as a 'collectible.'

They entered the saltfish plaza, its stone floor slick with scales and guts. A boom of thunder rolled in from over the sea. The rain increased its staccato tempo, popping noisily against the awnings of the fishmonger tents. Kels wiped the rain away from her eyes with the heel of her hand, but Dawson seemed to be enjoying the shower.

"Hey, Kels?" queried Dawson.

"This is the way to the landing pads. You said we needed power couplings."

Kels patted her waist.

"Got 'em." When Dawson still looked puzzled, she pulled back the cloth to partially reveal one. "Ufted them from the Squib."

Dawson's face lit up.

"Do you have the Quay?"

"What?" frowned Kels.

"The Quay. Did you palm it?"

"Are you insane? Of course not. You were there. Besides, why would I?"

Dawson's shoulders slumped with sudden gloom and Kels rolled her eyes. Dawson had a childish tendency to fixate on trivialities, then abandon them without warning. He looked back through the haze of rain in the direction of the traders' marketplace, a pathetic lost-cub expression on his face.

Kels laughed and shook her head.

"Don't even think about it."

"A Gun of Command," Tyro Viveca breathed with wonder. "An actual working Hapan brain-scrambler."

"I see you're a man who knows his weapons," Noone remarked. "But in most eyewitness accounts Guns of Command are hand pistols. This, as you can see, is a full-sized rifle."

"Yesss..." said Viveca, hefting the firearm and taking a bead down the length of the barrel. He twisted his upper body, sighted on the stuffed head of a Bothan *krak'jya*, and tensed his index finger, stopping short of depressing the trigger fully.

"Boom," he whispered, and giggled.

He abruptly raised his head and regained his professional composure.

"Why is that?"

Noone was taken aback by the Krish's odd display, but didn't show it.

"My associates have determined that the rifle is a one-of-a-kind prototype from the Charubah Armaments Guild, packing twice the persuasive potency of their original product."

That was only slightly less than a total lie. The prototype angle had been Kels' best guess, and without a Hapan pistol to compare the rifle with, the double-strength claim was a brazen con.

"You're welcome to field-test it, of course."

"Thank you. I will. Rutt!"

In response to his master's bark, Viveca's Houk servant trundled sluggishly through the doorway. He stood ready at the far wall, piggish eyes downcast, beefy hands folded over his stomach. Viveca blew an amused snort through his flat nostrils.

"Hold still, Rutt. This won't hurt a bit."

The room exploded in an inferno of crackling blue sparks. Tendrils of electricity crawled across the Houk's body and dissipated in pulsing waves from his hands and feet. Rutt spasmed once, twice, then assumed a vacant, dead-eyed stance, limbs dangling limply at his sides. If he hadn't remained upright, Noone would have sworn he was dead. Viveca's eyes narrowed in pleasure.

"Rutt - kneel!"

The Houk dropped to both knees with a resounding thunk.

"Rutt - lay!"

The Houk pitched forward and impacted the wooden floor with his face. Noone winced.

"Rutt - howl!"

The Houk drew both arms under his body, threw his head back, and bayed louder than a pack of Corellian canoids. Noone wrinkled his nose with distaste and swallowed a deep draught of dun brandy.

Viveca laughed uproariously and lowered the Gun of Command.

"Splendid! How long does the trance last?"

Noone struggled to make himself heard over the servant's strangled braying.

"On him? No longer than forty minutes. A human will stay under for at least an hour, an Ugnaught for two or three."

This, at least, was entirely true. During their first week of ownership, they'd tested the rifle on a wide variety of unsuspecting marks with impressive results.

Viveca grunted with satisfaction.

"Rutt - cease!"

The Houk halted in mid cry, though the afterecho continued to reverberate along the wine-colored walls.

"Let's get down to business, you and I. How much are you asking?"

Noone locked eyes with the Krish.

"One and a half million," he answered coolly. "But to honor your outstanding reputation I'll accept one point three in hard credits."

To Noone's surprise, Viveca didn't even blink. Instead, his eyes hardened and his voice took on an edge of tempered durasteel.

"Now let me make you an offer," he hissed in a threatening whisper. "I will take your Gun. I will give you zero credits, hard or otherwise. And if I am feeling charitable I might

even give you a chance at saving your worthless hide."

The brandy went down the wrong pipe. Noone gagged violently and hammered his chest with his fist.

"Excuse me?" he choked out.

"And you will accept my offer because you are Cecil Noone, leader of an amateurish band of petty thieves who stole this item from a well-connected crimelord. You will accept because Guttu the Hutt and the heirs of Ritinki each have warrants out on your life. You will accept because you have no other choice."

The blood seemed to be draining from Noone's body and pooling in the soles of his feet. His mouth struggled to generate a rejoinder and failed.

"Did you really think," Viveca went on, "that you could come skipping into my receiving room under an assumed name and try to sell me the only known prototype of the Hapans' rifle variant? Either you vastly underestimate your own notoriety or you think I have the brains of a gravel-maggot. You're quite famous, Mr. Noone, at least among those who keep tabs on the bit players in organized crime. And fame has its price."

Noone had regained his wits.

"You're right, Viveca," he confessed, "you've got me pegged."

The Gun, it's all yours. But you know I'm of far more use to you alive, in more ways than you can count. You lose nothing by - "

"My offer," the Krish cut him off, "my only offer, is this. I will let you leave my manor with the clothes on your back and the trinkets in your pockets. If you make it to the edge of my hunting grounds, you are free to raise ship and leave Kabal forever. But I am a seasoned tracker and an excellent shot. I seldom lose any quarry - certainly not one as foolish and guileless as yourself."

Guileless! Noone thought. He certainly knows how to get under my skin.

"You can't be serious," he said aloud, his voice rising with real anger.

"You're proposing to hunt me down like a twelve-point quivry for the game of it."

"Oh, but I am serious, Mr. Noone." Viveca looked delighted. "Deadly serious. You will soon learn - "

"No, Viveca, you didn't catch my meaning. I said you can't be serious. You think it's a fresh idea? An over-moneyed nutcase sets up a murder and calls it sport. I've seen it played out a hundred times in the flashy halo-thrillers."

The Krish's lips parted in an angry sneer, revealing interlocking rows of pearlescent daggers.

"I hope you were taking notes," he spat. "Rutt!"

The Houk stirred from his prone position on the floor and moved to stand by his master. Viveca nodded at Noone.

"Grab him by the collar."

Shuffling zombielike over to Noone's position, the towering alien squeezed the neck of Noone's shirt with one oversized meathook. The fabric stretched, the seam ripped, and the concealed emergency comlink was crushed to powder.

"You will not be calling anyone. You are entirely on your own. At least try to make it an amusing hunt."

Viveca leaned back and carefully studied Noone's face.

"For verification, Guttu will want your head. Ritinki's heirs will settle for your arms for the fingerprints and pore patterns. Those legs will feed my nashtah. Your torso...well, that will likely be vaporized with the first hit from my Kell Mark II. I'm

terribly sorry Mr. Noone, but only the finest specimens are kept intact for my trophy room."

Time's running out, thought Noone. If I'm going to make a move, it's got to be now.

"Rutt!" Noone shouted, pointing his finger at Viveca. "Kill him!"

Still under the influence of the Gun of Command, the Houk manservant lunged at his master with a feral moan-simultaneously, Noone vaulted a divan and dashed toward the wall display of vintage weapons. With a supple grace belying his bulk, Viveca moved one step out of Rutt's path, allowing the slight movement to add momentum to the sudden pivot of his upper body and the piston strength of his long arms. With a grunt, he brought the butt of the Hapan rifle squarely down on the nerve cluster at the base of Rutt's skull. The enormous Houk went down like a wet sack of bantha feed.

Noone reached the rack, yanked loose something resembling a crossbow, and spun around to take aim at Viveca. He then realized two things: The Krish already had him covered, and the crossbow wasn't loaded.

"Perhaps this will be enjoyable after all," Viveca smiled. "I suggest you start running."

Soaked with sweat, Kels disappeared into the shadow of the formidably armed luxury yacht berthed at Docking Pad P13. When they'd stolen the ship from a gangster, it had been known as the Amari Wind. In the month since, it had quickly run through Hieroglyph, Tailchaser, and Voona's Dream II. Currently the transponder identified it as the pleasure boat Spiraling Shape.

Kels clomped up the entry ramp and eased a satchel off one shoulder. A glance at the swollen clouds assured her another shower was imminent, and she rapidly punched today's keycode into the lock controlling the access hatch. The lock deliberated a moment, accepted the new numbers, and rolled the portal open with a hydraulic whine.

A billow of cool, dry air washed across her face as she stepped inside, but she winced at a tenacious stench reminiscent of putrefying goat cheese. Despite days of oxy recycling, they'd been unable to remove the last traces of Kothlis' peculiar atmosphere from the main cabin's air supply. Kels strode to the far wall and punched the vent fans up to full.

Sonax looked up from her spot at the tech station.

"What took sssso long?" she hissed over the roar of the fans. A Sluissi, she possessed a sinuous serpentine tail in place of legs. Her BioTech AY6 cyborg headband also made her a capable computer slicer.

"And where isss Dawson?"

"Nice to see you too, Sunshine," Kels quipped, flopping into an acceleration couch. "You know, do you come in any other style besides 'irked and bothered?'"

"Look who isss talking," Sonax muttered as she slithered to the wall and tapped the fans back down to their original setting. "We have a problem."

The hatch whirred open once more and Dawson padded into the cabin, panting.

"Gah!" he exclaimed as he sniffed the air with his damp black nose. "We didn't get rid of that yet?"

"What took you?" Kels asked. "I though tyou were right behind me."

Dawson paused.

"I picked up a sack of maraffa twigs." He fumbled through one duffel and removed a bundle of thin sticks packed in an oil-stained paper bag.

"See?" he declared, holding the white sack up for inspection. He shook loose one of the smooth twigs as he crossed the room and turned the fans up to maximum. Sonax threw up both hands with irritation.

"Lissssten, both of you," she announced. "Noone was due to check in thirty minutesss ago. According to my receiver, his com link isn't jusst inactive - it's been desstroyed."

"Destroyed?" Kels echoed with alarm.

"Jusst so. Ye tI do not think he is dead. I am monitoring the estate's EM emissions. Viveca has activated his hunting grounds and placed perimeter defenses on ssstandby. I ssssuspect the deal went bad and Noone made the poor decision to escape on foot. If he is sssstill alive, he will not be for long."

Kels cursed.

"The fool. Hoofing it through the forest with a famous hunter trying to take him down. Noone better still have the Gun, or a rescue won't be worth our time."

Dawson, leaning against the bulkhead, appeared to be deep in thought.

"Here's what we should do," he suggested, biting the tip off the maraffa twig with his long incisors and sucking out a dollop of sticky orange sap. "Power up the weapons and take the ship in high, parking it just above the manor - "

"Negative," Sonax interrupted. "Viveca isss a paranoid. The 'perimeter defenses' I mentioned consist of two automated turbolaserssss and a miniaturized energy ssshield. Lf we do anything, it has got to be sssneaky. "

Kels closed her eyes and sighed through gritted teeth.

"Well, that is what thieves do best."

Noone crashed through a bramble thicket, wet branches slapping his face. A steep slope loomed through the bracken; he misjudged his footing and skidded halfway down the muddy bank before breaking his fall against the thick bole of an arboray tree. Shaken, he rested for a moment, chest heaving, head down between his knees.

Viveca's property was divided into distinct terrain zones. Upon leaving the estate Noone had plowed through an interminable stretch of grassland before reaching the relative cover of this deciduous forest. His path thus far was an approximate straight line from the mansion to the nearest edge of the hunting grounds, a length he'd studied on a public map the previous evening and estimated at fifteen kilometers.

The shortest distance was guaranteed to be the most perilous distance, and would undoubtedly be the first place Viveca would come looking for him. But Noone knew when he was playing with a stacked deck. He wasn't about to play hide and seek on the enemy's home turf, and besides, if the Krish was on his way...

Maybe he could do a little card-shifting of his own.

Noone hadn't been boasting back in the game hall - he had seen this scenario before, in countless permutations from hackjob holoflicks to beautifully operatic Rodian dramas. And in every version, he reassured himself, the pursued successfully turned the tables on his pursuer.

Well, Noone remembered with a swallow, not in the Rodian plays...

He knew just what he had to do. Viveca might possess the finest beast-blasters money could buy, but Noone wagered the "seasoned tracker" drivel had been half bluff and half bravado. In fact, he chuckled, when the chips were down the Krish probably had the survival skills of an adolescent nature scout. With new confidence, Noone removed his multitool - the only useful item still on his person - and bent back a tree's firm green branch, testing its springiness and tension.

Never done this before, but how hard can it be? He scanned the snarled undergrowth for a fallen limb and unearthed a solid knot of hardwood, dead but not rotten. Flicking the stud that activated the vibro-edge on the multitool's main blade, he carved the knot into six pieces of roughly equal size. Picking up the first segment, he whittled it down to a sharp point.

The multitool made short work of the task at hand, and Noone began lashing each skewer to the end of the branch with sinewy stalks of cordgrass. Guileless, he said! I'll ram six chunks of pointed guile right down his fat throat.

The muddy slope would be perfect - Viveca would be watching his feet and wouldn't notice the trap until it was too late. Noone secured the last stake with a double hitch. Surveying the area with a satisfied sigh, he looped a length of cordgrass around his right arm, grasped the spike-studded tree limb, and bent it back away from the hill at nearly a ninety-degree angle. Holding the quivering bough with his left hand, he tried to shake the cordgrass loose from his bicep and failed. Switching tactics, he grabbed the rough bark in his right hand, reached for the cord with his left - and was knocked flat on his back as the branch whipped forward, glanced against his shoulder, and disappeared behind him with a scream of torn air.

Lying on the embankment, Noone blinked up stupidly at the mottled gray sky. That's not good. Struggling to a sitting position, he looked behind him to discover the limb was cracked, dangling limply by a light twist of fibers. Three of the six spikes were gone. Slag it! I don't have time to make another one!

Then he noticed the blood.

The three missing spikes hadn't gone far at all - they were firmly impaled in his left shoulder. Now this, Noone thought, gritting his teeth, this is much worse. With an agonized cry audible through clamped lips, he wrenched the points loose and staggered weakly to his feet. Okay Junior Woodsman, you just blew your one chance. Clapping his right hand over the wound to staunch the dark flow, Noone jogged off into the thickening trees.

BRZZZZT! Kels rapped her comlink against the hard metal frame of the data pad with equal measures of frustration and desperation.

"Try it again, Sonax."

Through the hissing and sputtering of her fritzing audio pickup came a faint, faraway voice: "Tessst..."

Kels pursed her lips.

"Now would be a great time to knock off the sibilants. I can hardly tell what's you and what's the static. Dawson!" she called back over her shoulder.

"Kick it into gear, would you?"

The Tynnan trotted up to join her, two lumpy duffels slung about his neck and one hold-out blaster strapped to his leg. Kels had insisted that he carry a sidearm for their foray into Viveca's turf, even though Dawson's mastery of lethal devices was limited to explosives containing unpronounceable chemical compounds.

Her boot sank into a shallow peat bog and she pulled it free with a wet sucking gurgle. They'd chosen the shortest stretch of territory - fifteen clicks from the edge to the mansion - but the outer terrain zone was a sodden, brackish, rot-stinking swamp. Her hand cleaved a path through a cobweb barricade strung between two stunted trees and a dark shadow scurried out of sight. The stagnant waters were crawling with furry gray spiders about the size of her hand. She hoped they weren't poisonous.

Kels glanced at the screen of her datapad - still blank.

"Sonax," she called into the comlink, "where's that location fix?"

"Working on it," came the distant reply. "Viveca owns a Rodian HT training sssystem - it has sssix independently-controlled repulsorlift drones that are used as targets in tracking exercises. He has ordered them to hunt down Noone and make sssure he remains in the field of play."

"Any good news?"

"I think I can ssslice into the drones' live data feed. When they know where Noone isss, I'll know where he isss, meaning you'll know where he isss."

"Dandy," Kels remarked. "Let us know when you've struck crystalline." She thumbed off the comlink. "Dawson, do you think you could - "

"PORTENTS VAGUE, ASK AGAIN LATER."

Kels had her gun in her hand in an instant and dropped into a fighting crouch, holding the weapon steady on the source of the unfamiliar voice. The next moment she lowered her arm, got to her feet, and exploded.

"What in space do you think you're doing? I could have blown a flaming crater right through your tiny speck of a brain!"

Dawson poked his head out from behind the Quay, which he'd thrust out in front of him as an ineffectual shield.

"Hey, what's with the hair trigger, here?" he shouted with anger born of fear. "I was just fiddling with it!"

Kels holstered her blaster with a growl.

"Now you know why I tossed that thing back in the market. Don't tell me you bought another one."

Dawson shook his head.

"It's the same Quay," he sniffed, patting down his ruffled fur.

"I got it back from the Squib for three blasting caps and a copper spindle."

"And you could have stolen it for nothing," she countered. "You've got to learn the value of a credit if you want to win in this business."

The comlink buzzed.

"That's Sonax. Put that thing away if you don't want to fish it out of a bog."

She switched on the speaker and caught Sonax in mid-sentence. " - broken into the visssual data feed of one drone. It isss a passive link only - I cannot influence the drone's flight path. Ssstandby."

Kels whistled with surprise.

"Not bad. Let's hold this position. Looks like we might get lucky and save ourselves a lot of pointless legwork."

The intermittent bubbling of the soggy mire seemed to grow louder in the sudden stillness. A few of the largest water-spiders hopped closer, broad footpads supporting their weight atop the swamp's grimy film. A sweeping splash from Kels' foot sent them scattering into the tangled shadows beneath the trees' shadowy roots. Dawson tapped his short claws rhythmically against the metal clasp of his satchel strap and stared absently into the vaporous mist. After several minutes passed without incident, the abrupt crackle of the active comlink made them both jump.

"Kelsss..."

"I'm here. What've you got?"

"The drone hasss picked up two targets - a human and an alien - and is moving to intercept."

"A human and an alien," Kels repeated, looking hopefully at Dawson. "That's gotta be Noone and the Krish. Where are they?"

"They cannot be far from your possition. The drone is accelerating and powering up its blasster. It is currently less than three hundred meters to the northeassst."

"Three hundred?" Dawson said, surprised.

"Why, that's practically nothing. We can be there in a flash."

"Hold on...it isss two hundred." Kels and Dawson glanced at each other, puzzled.

"Or less than two hundred," Sonax continued. "More like one-fifty. No, wait. Use

one-twenty. Ninety. Sssixty. Thirty. Oh, ssskrank-"

The bullet-bodied HT drone burst into the clearing amid a shower of loose leaves, firing madly as it raced through its initial pass. Kels instinctively dived head-first toward the mud, drawing her blaster as she fell and managing to snap off a few shots in the direction of the silver-plated killer, all of which went wide. The drone's furious spray of scarlet energy converged on Dawson. Several bolts impacted one of the satchels slung over his chest, burning three dark holes in the canvas and sending the Tynnan skidding through the water and into a fen-rotted log with a wet crunch. The drone continued its flight through the clearing, disappearing into the mist at the far side.

Kels, face down in the sludge, could still hear the whine of its compact repulsorlift as she pulled herself into a crouch. The sound faded, but shrieked suddenly as the high-boost engine came back online for round two. Kels spared a quick glance over at Dawson - not moving - and brought her blaster to bear as the machine zipped back into view. The drone spat red darts at her position and she squeezed the trigger. Her weapon wheezed and dislodged a glob of doughy clay.

Crying out in frustration, Kels kicked both feet with frantic strength, launching herself backward as a volley of bolts sizzled into the watery murk where she had been crouching a moment before. She readied her arm to throw her useless blaster at the oncoming hunter, knowing it would buy her little more than a second.

An unexpected shot erupted from the side, burning past her ear. Dawson stood unsteadily on both feet, clutching his blaster pistol in both paws and discharging a sloppy spray of fire that wasn't even close to its target. The drone made a few simple attitude jigs in its flight, spinning into a tight barrel roll and easily avoiding the clumsy threat. Once again its course took it to the edge of the clearing and it disappeared behind the gray curtain.

Dawson blinked frantically in a vain attempt to clear his head. His chest flashed with stabbing pain as he sucked in a shredded breath. Cocking his ears - for his treacherous vision appeared to be serving up doubles of everything - Dawson shakily held the blaster on the approximate point where he guessed the HT drone would reappear. The weapon was much heavier than he'd remembered, and seemed to deliver more of a kick, too. He deployed his thick tail behind himself as a brace.

Once more the drone tore through the treeline, at a higher angle this time, not at all where Dawson was aiming. His panicked answering shot, however, was so woefully off-target that it nearly succeeded in grazing the droid's durasteel casing through perverse luck alone. The tracker unit plunged to evade the salvo, getting off a few potshots of its own as Dawson poured more awkward fire in the direction of the destroyer. If it had been equipped with a vocabulator, the drone would have issued a contemptuous snort as it launched into a nimble zigzag and lined up a shot that would bore a hole in the Tynnan's left eye socket. Its starboard maneuvering jet hissed as the droid lurched in for the kill.

With an inarticulate scream, Kels swung her scavenged stick like a smashball mallet. The droid's sensor-studded nose impacted the flattest surface of the knotty branch with a force of 20 kilograms per square centimeter. With an agonized electronic squeal audible even above the reverberating CLANG of rattled metal, the HT drone sailed back the way it had come in a graceful ten-meter arc. The weak splashdown seemed rather vulgar by comparison.

Gasping, Kels approached Dawson, pulled the blaster from his unprotesting fingers, and strode over to the spot where the silver droid lay twitching in the mire. Its servos whined as it madly flailed its limbs in an attempt to right itself. Kels made an adjustment to the blaster's power setting, took deliberate aim at her target, and blasted the drone to superheated shrapnel at point-blank range.

She looked back at her companion.

"You're welcome, by the way," she managed, panting. "What's the damage?"

Dawson poked his head inside his newly-perforated satchel and let out a horrified squeal.

"Oh Fates! This is awful!"

"I didn't mean the bag, I meant you. I thought the drone had punctured you for sure." She walked up to Dawson and reached behind the ruined neck satchel, carefully running her

fingers through his chest fur. The Tynnan cheeped with pain and pulled his face from the sack.

"Take it easy!" Kels nodded. "Bruised ribs. I'd guess these lower two are broken. The fur's burnt away here, here, and here. If it weren't for that satchel, you'd be breathing through your ribcage."

"But look!" Dawson wailed, holding out the sack. "One bolt fused the comp-timer and another popped the ionizer! These were all my triggers and detonators, and now they're circuit wiped!"

"That's all your detonators? What's in the other sack?"

"Putty, thermite gel, shaped detonite, raw baradium, a few vials of nergon, all the explosives. But I can't set 'em off without an electronic trigger!"

Kels snorted as she broke open a field medkit and peeled the protective backing from a strip of synthflesh.

"You're not good for much then, are you? Maybe if another HT drone shows up you can catch it in that sack, tie off the end, and bring it back to the ship as a pet."

She handed the synthflesh to Dawson, who grudgingly took it. Both thieves headed back into the thick of the swamp to continue their search-and-rescue.

"Dawson - by any chance, did those laser blasts slag the Great and Powerful Quay?"

"Nope. It's in the other bag."

"Stang."

Rocks. First grassland, then forest, now a vast tumble of ruddy boulders, some the size of a cargo freighter. Scrub vegetation peeked out between the sheltered cracks and occasionally a hardshelled arthropod flashed from a tiny bore-hole. Noone had long since given up estimating how much money it would take to terraform a region to such a degree. One point three million was loose change, he fumed. The cheapskate.

The makeshift bandages wrapped around his shoulder, hastily crafted from the ragged strips of his jacket sleeves, were black with encrusted blood. His boot soles scraped against the stony surface as he tried to summit a gargantuan slab, a task made all the more difficult with only a single functional arm.

Noone reached the zenith, looked down at a sheer three-meter drop, and jumped. He hit the surface and a chuff of air involuntarily escaped his lips. Strangely, the ground looked artificially smooth and sounded hollow. Noone advanced several paces, saw another, shorter drop, and hopped down.

He'd been standing on a cage. The solid durasteel sheets composing the rear and sides were partially buried, but the front-a wide panel of tightly meshed squares was fully exposed. Realizing he had to keep moving but curious in spite of himself, Noone placed his face up to the grid and peered inside.

Something slammed against the door with a crash and a sizzle. Terrified, Noone took a step backward, tripped on a stone, and landed flat on his backside. The thing retreated into the darkness at the rear of the box as angry yellow sparks played across the surface of the mesh.

A force cage. Designed to deliver an incapacitating stun shock to any prisoner who attempted escape. Noone had seen plenty of them throughout his lifetime and had even been locked inside one during a disastrous early burglary. The standard factory installed locks were fairly easy to defeat.

He stood and placed one hand safely against the interlacing bars. The shock charge in a force cage was projected across the interior surface only. The caged beast stirred and turned its head-if one could call it a head-in his direction.

It was a lamproid. The other lamproid, Noone reminded himself, the female that Viveca was arrogantly saving for future ventry. The primitive creature was utterly hideous, a parasitic intestinal worm that nature had insanely blessed with a colossal frame and a

predator's instincts. Its oily gray skin was blemished with crosshatched electrical burns. The floor of the narrow enclosure swam with fetid animal waste, blood, and bile.

The lamproid drew its barbed face up to the mesh, across from Noone's palm. The metallic grid began to hum dangerously but the creature stopped short of the crippling stun field. A tiny wet filament curled from between two yellowed fangs and quivered in the air as if sampling Noone's scent. Abruptly the appendage retracted. The beast reared back and seemed to take careful stock of its visitor.

A bothersome itch attacked the nape of Noone's neck. He raised his good arm to scratch until he realized the tickle was emanating from inside his skull. The creeping sensation slowly spread across the top half of his brain as if probing for a way inside. He stared back at the lamproid, fascinated. Telepathy, or something else?

The tingling grew stronger, more insistent, until it felt as if a flapping moon moth had crawled in his ear and become trapped in his cranium. An instant later, twin streaks of warmth shot from the top of his spine and the fingertips of his left hand. Both streams followed bone and converged at his shoulder, generating a hot glow that made a slow turn around the injured joint. Noone was dimly aware of his pulse pounding.

The alien perception gently withdrew, and with it went most of Noone's pain. Astonished, he held up his arm and made a fist. Fresh blood oozed from the puncture wounds and glistened on the soiled bandages.

Oops. That didn't heal it, just made it easier to bear. He pressed down on the dressings and looked back at his benefactor.

"Uh.., thanks. Thank you."

The lamproid didn't move. Noone felt an uncomfortable pressure behind his eyes, like the onset of a sinus headache. Words leapt unbidden to his tongue.

"You have to get out of there."

More pressure.

"I will open this door:'

A gentle yank carried Noone over to the lock. His consciousness watched from a faraway place as his hands fumbled with his multitool and extended the hole punch. Child's play. A simple jig in the input slot disabled the stun field; a thrust-and-lift unlatched the bolt. The door swung open with a squeak.

Still unsure what had just transpired, Noone watched as the lamproid vanished into the undergrowth. The nashtah strained at the leash. Its six taloned paws dug eagerly at the moist soil as it snuffled a heap of fallen leaves. Picking up the scent, the animal raised its chunky head and bayed with perfect joy. The howl cut off in a strangled urf as Viveca jerked on the taut lead.

"Heel!" he barked.

The forest zone had ended. Ahead of them, in an abrupt, obviously unnatural division, stretched the boulder zone. Thousands of titanic rocks lay piled in a vast jumble, some stacked atop one another like children's building blocks, others scattered randomly as if dropped from orbit. The hunt would be more difficult from here, but only slightly. Viveca doubted his prey had the sense to seek out the underground cave networks he had modeled after Trammic mome warrens, even though the entrances were obvious and they offered excellent cover. No, Noone would surely keep to the same straight-line path he'd followed thus far. It was a pity his landscape contractor hadn't gotten around to installing the spewing lava spouts.

Viveca wrapped the nashtah's leash around his left wrist and transferred his heavy blaster rifle to the same hand. Wordlessly, he held out his empty palm. Rutt, the Houk manservant, removed a datapad-sized tracking device from his overstuffed equipment pack and handed it to his master.

The Rodian Hunter-Trainer drone system was proving a major disappointment. Viveca tapped a command into the device and read the scrolling data. Two of the droids had found nothing, one had returned to the manor to fix its faulty repulsorlift engine, one was stuck in a

stranglethorn patch not more than a klick from here, and the last - well, that one appeared to have vanished entirely. He would certainly have words with his Rodian arms dealer when they next crossed paths.

Sometimes, the Krish decided, it was impossible to beat a trained Dravian hound, a loyal porter, and an afternoon of fresh air. The old ways were still the best.

Still glancing at the drones' status report, Viveca shook the nashtah's leash and clicked his tongue. The animal leapt up and jubilantly pulled forward, clambering over the first column of stones. Viveca smiled. It was often difficult to follow a scent over rocky terrain, but Noone had been leaking blood ever since the onset of the forest tract. A spiked branch! Oh, it was rich. For someone to assume he would be taken in by such a prank was laughable; for the trap to backfire on such a person was hilarious. The final confrontation would be a delight. Well, Mr. Noone, it appears the hunt is at an end...much like your life. No, he wanted something snappy, something memorable. A merry chase, Mr. Noone, but -

A dark twist erupted from the rocks ahead and shot forward with a sonic crack. Faster than the eye could follow, the attenuated blur launched itself at Rutt, who was standing directly in its path. In the same instant a loop of tight coils swung toward the startled nashtah like a hangman's noose.

Viveca's breath seized in his throat and he let the datascreen fall from his fingers. One end of the indistinct attacker reached Rutt's chest and kept moving in a clean surgical stab through multiple layers of bone and cartilage. A barbed tail emerged from the center of the field backpack fleshed wetly in the light, and withdrew before Rutt's reflexes could mount a response. The Houk's hands went belatedly to the hole in his heart and his knees buckled.

Viveca shifted his blaster rifle to his right hand and started to bring the nose up.

The furious tangle wrapped around the nashtah and exploded outward, snapping the leash and propelling the yipping hound into the air. A severed leg spun crazily toward the treeline. Viveca brought the weapon to bear and readied a shot. With a boiling hiss, the creature fell upon him. Heaving rings of flesh enveloped the Krish with lightning speed and pitiless strength. The monster looped around his torso - pinning his gun arm - and brought its razor-toothed mouth forward in a predatory death strike. Viveca's left hand shot up and intercepted the demon's head just centimeters from the soft folds of his jugular area.

The two stood locked in a silent combat of wills. Viveca's fingers dug into the beast's hot skin while its coils shifted and flowed along his body. The vice-hold on his blaster faltered and the Krish nearly yanked his weapon free. In response, the muscular rings clamped down and tightened their suffocating grip. The nightmare face drew closer, its rings of shredder teeth churning, and a quivering drop of clouded venom beaded at the tip of one fang. Viveca's arm shuddered with exertion. Letting loose a tormented grunt, Viveca budged the laser cannon one centimeter, then another. The serpentine horror constricted still further. The blaster continued to work loose in tiny jerks. Viveca felt an unbearable pressure building inside his skull. With a final, agonized wrench, the Mark II came free. Realizing its sudden peril, the beast loosened its coils and brought its tail stinger back for an eviscerating swipe at its enemy's belly.

Something popped inside Viveca's brain and a trickle of blood ran from his nostril. His grip didn't slacken. Viveca placed the rifle's wide barrel against the creature's chin and fired. A roar of energy immolated the organic chunk and streaked up to the sky as a pillar of flame. The headless corpse went limp and Viveca dropped it to the ground. A pathetic finger of smoke wafted up from the ash-cauterized stump that had once been a neck. Disgusted, Viveca kicked the lamproid's motionless remains. The struggle had cost him a trophy head. From somewhere behind the nearest cluster of stone blocks the nashtah growled and barked with pain.

Rutt lay facedown in the gravel and, by the looks of the exit wound, would never stir again.

A manservant dead, a hound crippled, a lamproid wasted, and a perfectly splendid afternoon spoiled. Viveca's eyes smoldered.

Noone had a great deal to answer for. Whatever magic elixir the lamproid had willed into his shoulder had a pretty weak duration time. Or perhaps the numbing effect lessened with distance. Either way, the joint was throbbing as painfully as ever when Noone entered the

jungle zone.

Bambooi reeds sprouted from the spongy soil in close bundles often or more. Other stalks, apparently a different breed, had diameters in excess of sixty centimeters at the base and spread into four tapering branches as they fought for the sky. The thicket stretched several meters above his head and swayed slightly as a breeze rustled the trembling clusters of starburst leaves. In some spots, the shoots grew so closely together that forward passage was impossible. Noone weaved through the gaps wherever they appeared and kept one eye on the position of the sun. He was forced to double back on his course four times in the first twenty minutes and was much relieved when, after a frustrating fifth dead end, he stumbled across what looked like a trail.

The path, little more than a meter wide, ran in a relative straight line directly on the heading he needed to follow. Amazed at his good fortune, Noone broke into a weary jog.

A sudden thought brought him up short. Why was there a trail here? It was far too clean to be a natural result of the bambooi's growth pattern. Since Viveca had engineered his hunting grounds to his personal specifications, he must also have designed this trail. And Viveca wasn't the type to make things easy for his playthings.

Cautiously, Noone crept forward, scanning the ground and the shoots on each side for anything that looked out of place. After he'd gone a short distance without incident, the path abruptly doubled in width. He stopped before a small circular clearing. The path continued on its opposite edge. The perfect spot for a booby trap. The soil at the edge of the clearing looked rough and disturbed, and the dead reeds piled at the center appeared to have been cut with a vibroblade.

Though Noone had never encountered one in life, every child who'd ever read an adventure serial was familiar with a Ralltiir tiger pit.

Noone chuckled. He, at least, was no fool. Backtracking several paces, he began searching for a gap in the reed clusters that would allow him to bypass the entire clearing. Moving quickly - for perhaps the covered pit was designed to slow him down as much as catch him - he squeezed between two stalks and picked his way forward.

Considering he'd left the main thoroughfare, the way was surprisingly easy going. It almost seemed as if he'd found an overgrown game run. The thought didn't reassure him, and he considered striking back for the main path. He should be past the trap by now...

One step brought him up to the edge of a tiny pocket clearing; the second step carried him inside it before he could stop himself. Immediately, an invisible hand yanked him to the flat ground with such savagery his teeth shoveled a spray of dirt down the back of his throat.

What happened? Noone raised his head, spat out the gritty mouthful, and came to the sickening realization that he couldn't move the rest of his body. He'd been paralyzed. The impact had ruptured his spinal column.

Hold on, Noone reminded himself. No need to panic. His bleak diagnosis must be flawed, since he could clearly see his fingers twitching. He swept both forearms back and forth across the soil then wiggled his feet experimentally. A distant rustle answered him.

Not paralysis, then. But something was pinning his thighs and torso to the ground with an inhuman strength. It felt as if an industrial freight hauler had parked on his back.

With a groan, he realized the truth. A man trap. A one-meter square metal slab rigged with gravfield generators. Unlike standard repulsorlifts, which pushed against a planet's mass and allowed landspeeders to float, grav generators intensified the local gravity by a factor of eight. Once seized by a man trap, not even a Wookiee could fight his way free.

But it couldn't hurt to try. A sustained push with his palms gained him nothing and brought about further agony in his injured left arm. Inexplicably, the relatively minor effort left him unable to draw a breath. Noone quickly tried to remember everything he'd heard or read about man traps.

The news wasn't encouraging. Though advertised as a safe, non-lethal way to subdue a fleeing target, the Ubrikkian R-TechApp model had a number of detrimental side effects. Once pinned, a victim's lungs struggled to expand under conditions they were never designed to handle. The pumping of a heart became a laborious task to stave off cardiac

arrest. Vital fluids toiled through grav-compressed passages and could burst under the strain. Eventually blood would begin to puddle in abdominal organs and the brain would shut down from lack of oxygen. Any bounty hunter who left a man trap unattended would return to find a dead mark.

Not very sporting, is it? Noone wondered if Viveca's love for bloodsport would be satisfied by a finding a helpless victim choking on his own bile. He doubted it would, and that bothered him. Of course, like the tiger pit, Viveca's fun might lie in discovering whether Noone could avoid the trap in the first place. He hadn't. The hunt was over.

Or was it? Was this another test of wits? Noone twisted his neck and scanned the brush. The Ubrikkian R-TechApp came with a remote activator and a 10-meter activation cord. It had to be close, and - there!

To his left, wedged between a crowd of slender reeds just under two meters distant, glinted the silver plasteel of the remote activator. Its surprising proximity both puzzled and reassured Noone. Viveca could have buried the device well over the next rise. Instead, he'd placed it here - in sight and out of reach.

The activation cable was likely plugged in to the closest corner. Noone's left hand scrabbled along the trap's smooth edge and located the attachment socket. A yank on the cord pulled it free from the shallow layer of dirt that had hidden it and caused the activator to slide forward a centimeter or two.

The activation cord and grav plate were firmly bolted together. Noone knew he'd never separate them without a set of tools, but tried anyway without success.

He pulled on the cord to bring the activator closer but the device was blocked behind a tangle of reeds. Breaking the cable was out of the question.

A breeze swept through the clearing, cooling his sweat-stained face and bringing with it a sound that chilled him even further. The distant baying of Viveca's nashtah.

Think, think! His multitool, tucked away in a pants pocket, might as well be on the dark side of Kabal's moon. He couldn't drag the activator into his grasp. Could he extend something over to the activator?

He scanned the ground again. No rocks, no wires, no spools of fibercord. Around him, the bambooi shoots were the thickness of tree trunks. Except, that is, for the underbrush. Stretching out his arm with a groan, Noone closed his right hand around a clump of tiny seedlings and pulled them out by the roots.

The effort triggered an explosion of suffering in his chest and he squeezed his eyes shut until the agony subsided. His heart palpitated in weak shivering flutters.

Each stem was as long as his forearm, as wide as his finger, and slightly tapered near the tip. What's more, each was hollow and surprisingly rigid. Noone broke the root segment off one plant and fitted the remainder onto the top of a second stem. The double-length pointer felt light in his hands and showed no sign of bending.

He added two more shoots, then stretched out to pluck more. Fireworks popped behind his eyes. He tried to swallow but couldn't, and fluid leaked from his mouth. Another stalk painstakingly joined the interlocking pole.

His legs, at the point where his knees left the grav plate, felt as if some fiend were amputating them with a plasma torch. Similar lines of fire burned across his upper chest.

With a start, Noone realized that the man trap was actually keeping blood away from his punctured shoulder. If the wound had fallen inside the grav field when he'd been pulled to the ground, he would already have hemorrhaged to death.

One final stem. With quaking hands, Noone lifted the swaying two-meter stick. In one of the small miracles that sometimes befall career gamblers, it didn't break.

He shakily guided the prod toward the activator. As he tried to steady its path, dark blotches appeared at the edges of his vision, a shrill screech rang in his ears, and his pain eased tremendously, which terrified him most of all. It meant he was mere moments from unconsciousness.

The stick stretched out toward the intensity control on top of the activator. If he could dial it down to two or three gees, he should be able to roll off the grav plate. The sun suddenly went dark.

Concentrate, please concentrate, he willed himself. It's just you and the branch, the branch and the dial. Nothing else matters. The bamboo tip clanged uselessly off the base of the activator. Noone pulled it back for another try. Wobbling with tension, the pointer brushed delicately against plasteel.

A furred, mud-encrusted foot stomped down and snapped the rod cleanly in two.

Noone blinked and a shape swam into focus.

"Dawson!" he roared, infuriated. "You broke my stick!"

The Tynnan looked down at his feet, opened his mouth in a silent "O" of surprise, and said something muffled and distant. Noone could no longer hear anything save the thundering of blood through his eardrums. An indistinct pale figure moved behind Dawson and pointed a blaster, and the activator vanished in a soundless flash of light.

Blessed relief inundated his flattened body and he willingly slipped into oblivion.

Noone came to with a spastic twitch and an involuntary gasp. His hands slapped at his face as he batted away the small vial Kels held beneath his nose.

"Enough!" he croaked. "What is that stuff?"

Kels shrugged.

"Chemical smelling salts, looks like. From the medkit. We've got to keep moving if we want to stay ahead of your friend, and I'm not about drag you."

"You might have to," Noone said gravely. "That grav field did a number on everything except my hairstyle." He looked back at the deactivated man trap. "How did you find me?"

"Take the shortest distance and run it in a beeline, that looked to be about your style. We had our own adventures along the way."

Noone looked around.

"Where'd Dawson go?"

"He's hoping he can set up an ambush, but his explosives are useless without a detonator. Noone - what happened to the Gun of Command?"

"Kid, if I still had the Gun, Viveca would be here right now massaging my toes. I doubt we'll ever see it again."

Cold fury was evident in the set of her eyes, though she bit back the angry retort that formed in her brain.

"I see," she managed instead, her voice icy.

Noone watched her carefully. There was a chance they could eventually recover the weapon if Viveca put it back into circulation on the arms market. They could even put together a plan for robbing the manor. But there was no sense going into detail when a more pressing concern was headed their way.

"We'd better make tracks," Kels finally conceded, consulting her datapad. "Sonax made a rough estimate of the Krish's position by tracing a drone signal back to his handheld transmitter. He's less than ten minutes away."

Noone groaned as his young accomplice helped him to his feet. Somehow, he'd have to find a bacta tank.

Dawson emerged from the dense thicket a bit farther up the trail.

"Let's move," he announced. "It's unstable, but it's the best I could do since somebody slagged the circuits in the man trap."

"What did you - "

"C'mon! This thing's motion-sensitive and I don't know how long it'll last!"

"Dawson - "

"Go! Go! Go!" The Tynnan broke into a run.

Tyro Viveca strode purposely forward, a creature of pure rage. That preposterous human had humiliated him, robbed him of a valued servant, and nearly gotten him killed. And the irony was that, without a doubt, the little dunce had no idea what he had truly done.

An intelligent opponent would have formulated a plan for turning the lamproid against his pursuer; Noone had just opened the door and uncorked a bottle of random lightning. Viveca spat at the ground with manifest contempt. That Noone hadn't been killed himself was a miracle, and Viveca had no tolerance for "lucky" dunces. Each footfall took him one step closer to his rightful prize.

The nashtah sniffed the ground around the bambooi stalks. Though its leash had been ruined in the attack and subsequently discarded, the loss of its middle right leg seemed to have cured the beast of its overanxious tendency to run ahead. Dravian hounds were known for their rugged constitutions and this one had recovered from its partial dismemberment in minutes. Before it would continue, however, the animal had viciously disemboweled the six-meter carcass of its attacker. Despite the wasted seconds, Viveca had allowed it. He could think of no aesthetic use for lamproid skin without ahead to accompany it.

The limping nashtah followed the scent onto the main trail. Viveca smiled. Had his prey fallen into the tiger pit? It would be delicious to see Noone impaled on a bed of vibro-stakes, but Viveca rather hoped the human had landed safely and pulled loose one of the spikes to use as a hand weapon. He pictured himself snatching the spike out of his opponent's hands, then gutting his astonished foe from belly to neck.

Surprisingly, however, the scent quickly led off the track and back into the thicket. The nashtah disappeared among the stalks and Viveca followed with measured steps. This could be even more delightful, he thought, as he recognized the overgrown and nearly nonexistent run. Now he would gauge Noone's true worth. It would be a pity if the human had already expired from gravitic distress, but Viveca could live with that. Such a death was invariably lingering and painful.

It occurred to him to call back the nashtah lest it be injured by the man trap, but as he rounded a bend he realized his caution was unnecessary. The durasteel activation plate lay on the ground, inactive and unoccupied. The hound was busily pawing at the reeds on the opposite side. Puzzled, Viveca stepped forward to examine the remote activator. Nothing remained of the device save a burnt fistful of dull melted alloy.

A blaster shot! Noone had accomplices! Cursing, he shouldered his rifle and scanned the trail for a surprise ambush. Nothing happened, and Viveca realized that the fugitives would have fled in panic at the earliest opportunity.

His opponent had cheated! The thought ran through his mind with such palpable disgust it approached physical nausea. Lack of ability he could understand. Stupidity even, in a pitying way. But poor sportsmanship? Never. He would find everyone involved and flay their hides with a high-intensity laser.

The nashtah, yapping feverishly at him, appeared to have picked up a scent. It pressed through the growth until only its rear set of legs were visible, trembling with anticipation and shaking the pale shoots violently. Viveca thought he heard nearby voices.

Fools. His lips curled in a triumphant sneer as he crept closer. Sad fools.

Yes indeed. A deep male voice was distinctly emanating from the copse just ahead, though he couldn't quite make out what it was saying. Viveca readied his weapon and parted the pliant shoots separating him from his trophy.

His eyes took in the tableau in an instant.

A white plastic ball, a child's toy, nestled in a bambooi cradle.

"OUTLOOK NOT SO GOOD."

Two copper wires snaking into the toy's exposed innards, glued in place against a sound chip with what looked like orange maraffa sap.

"OUTLOOK NOT SO GOOD."

Both golden filaments spilling to the ground and running up against -

"OUTLOOK NOT SO GOOD."

- A melon-sized wad of detonite tape.

The nashtah whined. Viveca grimaced.

The explosion neatly flattened four hectares of bambooi.

Bacta was a miraculous panacea. It had cured plagues. It had healed the nearly dead. It had changed the face of modern medicine. Trouble was, it was almost criminally expensive.

Military goons took quality medical care for granted, Hass Sonax hissed to herself. For a no-name thief with uncertain credit and nonexistent insurance, the medcenters of Kabal might as well be impregnable castle keeps. Well, there was no other way they'd have to create a false admissions record in the city's central computer and skip out on the bill. Sighing, the Sluissi keyed up her cyborg interface band and prepared for some data slicing.

Across the yacht's opulent cabin, Noone lay stretched on an overstuffed acceleration couch, decorative throw pillows supporting his head and feet. Dawson sat on the floor next to him, reading the instruction manual that came with the ship's emergency medkit.

"And I'm saying that now's the perfect time to go for the Gun." Kels stopped pacing along the vessel's midline and tapped her foot anxiously. "If the Krish is dead, he manor's either in total chaos or quiet as the grave. let's make a smash-and-grab now, before some local yeggs beat us to it."

Dawson quietly indicated Noone's makeshift pallet.

"Have some respect, will you? He's still breathing, and I'm trying to keep it that way."

"A medkit will keep him stable - "

"A medkit will not!" Dawson shot to his feet in an uncharacteristic display of anger. "How am I supposed to stop internal bleeding with synthflesh and gauze?"

Sonax unplugged her computer jack from the tech station and looked at them testily.

"Forgive me, but I ran across an interessting entry in the law-enforcement database. We have to raise ssship, now. The authorities are halting all outgoing flights until passengers can be quesstioned."

Kels swore and sprinted for the cockpit.

"The looting will have to wait," Sonax called after her. "And we'll have to find an off-planet bacta facility."

Dawson nodded and secured Noone to the couch with crash webbing. As he hustled aft to jump-start the rear converters, he abruptly skidded to a stop on the polished deck plates.

"Sonax!" he cried. "We forgot about the landing shackle!"

Kea Ki Trang strode confidently up the ramp of the star yacht berthed at Docking Pad P13. The ship was a beauty, all right, though her defensive cannons were far too large for a vessel of her size. He'd be sure to have a few words with the captain about proper commercial lift/mass ratios. And, while he was at it, it wouldn't hurt to see a waiver for that military turbolaser.

Two handpicked members of his security detail took position behind him as he rapped on the hatch.

"This is Palisade Starport Control, requesting to speak to the captain of the..." he consulted his clipboard, "Spiraling Shape. Open the hatch immediately."

Trang had no idea the owners of this craft were involved in that odd explosion at Viveca's place, but the mayor had demanded a full security crackdown. Fortunately, Tabor and Kilgore had a crudely effective way of loosening tongues. He knocked again.

"I repeat, this is Palisade Starport Control. Open the hatch or we will do it for you." He nodded to Tabor, who moved toward the portal with an electronic lock breaker. In response, the ship shivered and whined with the familiar sounds of startup.

The three officers stepped back onto the sizzling tarmac, throwing each other amused grins. The vessel couldn't go anywhere with the docking pad's heavy durasteel security shackle still affixed to its landing gear strut. By starting their engines anyway, they were tacitly admitting their own guilt. Trang shook his head and signaled the control tower. A squad of armored soldiers trooped forth, each carrying a heavy blaster rifle.

The yacht floated forward on its repulsorlifts a few scant centimeters, but the shackle's chain caught and held fast. In his thirteen years on the job, Trang had never seen one break. He stood well back and folded his arms to watch the fun.

The landing skids bounced up and down against the permacrete as the ship futilely bucked the chain. The soldiers marched closer, readying their weapons for a disabling shot.

Without warning, the yacht's huge bank of sublight engines came online with an earsplitting roar. The troopers halted in their tracks, and Trang's mouth dropped open in astonishment. What in the galaxy were they doing?

The tether shuddered as the ship strained forward, whipping furiously from side to side. The manacled landing-gear strut bent backward sickeningly. Suddenly realizing what would happen next, Trang waved his arms frantically at the oncoming soldiers.

"Shoot them!" he shouted, but his words were lost in the thunderous rumble.

In a single horrible instant, the strut wrenched free from the body of the yacht, tearing loose a structural girder, numerous hull plates, the other rear landing strut, and the entire aft repulsorlift assembly. Trang hit the ground as the chain snapped backward. The twisted mass of jagged starship parts sailed safely over his head.

The crippled vessel blasted out to sea, bouncing against the breakers like a skipping stone. Pointing its nose skyward, the yacht ignited its ion engines, vaporizing a cone of saltwater that left a swelling spray of white mist.

Moments later, the fugitive ship vanished into the thick gray clouds.